

By Arlene Anderson

Can't We All Just Get Along?



A district educational technology specialist talks about how mutual understanding and good communication skills can bridge the gap between educators and IT techs.

“My computer won't work! Why is the Internet down again?
My e-mail is frozen! My files are missing!
Why is it taking so long for IT to get here?”

In the world of teaching with technology, there are constant challenges. Often that leads to tension between the teachers who are using technology in the classroom and the IT techs who are charged with installing and setting up new computers, ordering new equipment, making sure software programs are up to date, and securing the system.

IT techs might complain that requests for support often come from reluctant or inexperienced teachers unable or unwilling to try basic troubleshooting techniques. Teachers,

on the other hand, might say they lack the skills to confidently use or integrate technology into their classrooms. Administrators might fear that teachers are using their students—who are often more knowledgeable about technology than the teachers themselves—to support classroom needs when the students should be focused on learning other things.

In our district, an influx of requests for help with hardware created a stressful time for the IT department. The district installed a closed-circuit TV system with video on demand in

all the schools the previous year, and it was barely being used. Implementing a data analysis program required continued training and support for teachers. Technology was moving at light speed around us, and we were falling behind. Clearly the support system was overloaded.

Bridging the Gap

District leaders understood they needed someone who could help integrate technology into the classroom and, at the same time, understand and communicate the needs of the IT department. So they created a new position, the district educational technology specialist.

It became my job to bridge the gap between educational technology and information technology. I understood that serving a district of 15 schools

could be a complicated job because administrators and teachers tend to focus on students and achievement, and IT techs are mainly concerned with infrastructure. When I started my position, there were no guidelines except to make sure teachers and administrators were supported and that IT kept things working in the classroom.

I began by setting up meetings with each site administrator to determine specific problems and needs. Some sites needed assistance with the video-on-demand system, and others needed basic instructions for setting up classroom computers.

These meetings also allowed me a chance to do some basic troubleshooting, and sometimes I was able to fix problems immediately.

It's in my nature to solve problems, ask questions, listen carefully to instructions and answers, and communicate needs clearly, so it was easy for me to clearly explain problems to IT, which helped streamline the support process. The rapport I developed paid off. Administrators and teachers began asking me for assistance when equipment broke down or systems failed because I spoke this foreign language of IT.

My site visits also unveiled some kinks in the system. I discovered that many teachers were unaware of the district's tech plan and didn't know we had switched servers from Windows to Linux. This caused headaches for one school when officials purchased software that wouldn't run on Linux. Had they read the tech plan, school officials would have understood that all equipment must be cleared through IT to avoid situations like this. It was a valuable lesson.

Failure to Communicate

It is not unusual for teachers and administrators to become frustrated when they cannot articulate how they'd like to see technology integrated into the curriculum. It's very common, for example, for a teacher to ask to use a

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program in a way it was not designed for. At the same time, IT technicians can become so focused on system and hardware upkeep that they are unable to help teachers integrate tools effectively in the classroom.

Solving these conflicts comes down to listening and problem solving. When teachers complain that their students cannot access the school servers from home, a helpful IT tech should offer alternatives, such as suggesting they store data on USB drives or use the file section of the student learning environment.

When the video-on-demand system goes down, the easiest thing to do is move students into another classroom. That's fine for a temporary fix, but classroom disruption can ruin a well-thought-out lesson. Rather than just demand to have the equipment fixed immediately, which never goes over very well, a teacher should explain the impact on the students and make a case for getting a quicker permanent fix. After all, we're all here to help improve student achievement, and IT techs generally will accommodate such requests if they understand the justification.

Mutual Understanding

Getting IT techs involved beyond the nuts and bolts of system upkeep is key to getting them to buy in to your projects. Three years ago, our IT director, Jim Kein, would never have attended conferences such as Computer Using Educators (CUE) or ISTE's annual conference and exposition. Now he not only attends, but he presents

about programs he has developed for our district. His first exposure to an ed tech conference was to support a teacher whose students were asked to present their project at the California CUE conference.

After spending some time walking through the exhibit hall together, we talked about what was working and what was not in the classroom. He got a better understanding of what a classroom teacher needs, and he later got the chance to collaborate on some projects. He has since become involved with ed tech organizations such as K-12 Open Source and the Consortium of School Networking (CoSN). He has also become very involved with open-source programs, and he has helped our school make tremendous strides in technology integration.

Newfound Cooperation

Now our IT department looks for ways to streamline tech support. It was our IT director who implemented a help desk, a simple phone number that teachers can call to get assistance quickly. If the question can't be handled over the phone, the technician will take over the computer remotely using virtual network computing and try to correct the problem. If the situation cannot be resolved, the next step is a repair request. Even teachers who are reluctant to call appreciate the efficiency of the help desk.

A new level of cooperation and respect has surfaced over the last couple of years. Sometimes I am able to work with educators and IT techs to find

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a solution. Other times I need to explain to teachers why their requests have been denied. In the past, such communication didn't happen, and resentment brewed. These days our discussions are more likely to lead to improvements in current programs.

Recently, for example, we stopped installing Microsoft Office on new computers unless the school agreed to pay for the license. Instead, computers were equipped with Open Office. It was difficult for teachers to adapt to the new program, and many became frustrated. Instead of letting the anger fester, we instituted workshops and one-on-one trainings with teachers. We also explained our rationale for

the change: saving money that could be better used elsewhere. Once administrators and teachers understood that, and attended some workshops or got help from IT, they warmed up to using Open Office.

Now we're working on getting teachers trained in technology troubleshooting and integration so they can start helping themselves. This has been a hard sell with some teachers who feel overwhelmed. But training teachers to incorporate technology into their lessons is no longer optional. Newly adopted curricula includes more technology than ever before. The key is to find a few enthusiastic teachers at the building sites and encourage them to

help train and promote tech integration to their peers.

In the end, that special magic that happens between IT and ET has a lot to do with respect and understanding on both sides, followed by communication and support for each department. Everyone has to become comfortable stepping out of the box for the common goal of student achievement.



Arlene Anderson is the educational technology specialist for the Saugus Union School District in Santa Clarita, California. A former classroom teacher for more than nine years, she is a passionate advocate for effective integration of technology in the classroom.



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